



Ageism jokes are no laughing matter

Media should take the lead in cutting out the codger cracks from campaign coverage.

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What's so funny about getting older?

How come people over 70 laugh at jokes like this one:

After weeks of watching her husband's memory lapses, a wife finally got him tested for Alzheimer's disease. The next day the doctor called and said there had been a mix-up with test results and they didn't know if her husband had Alzheimer's or AIDS. "Can't you do another test?" the wife asked. The doctor said Medicare wouldn't pay for another test.

His suggestion: Drop him off downtown. If he finds his way home, don't sleep with him.

Now there's a thigh slapper.

Seems there's no taboo on codger jokes.

Here's this one from Jay Leno:

"You can't criticize Hillary. Oooh, that's sexism. You can't criticize Barack. Oooh, that's racism."

And the punch line: "And you can't go after McCain, because that's elder abuse."

Well, even Bob McCann, an associate professor of management communication at USC Marshall School of Business, chuckled at that one.

He laughed despite his conclusion that the wrong language – denigrating older workers – can have an outsized negative impact on employee productivity and even corporate profits.

McCann has just finished some research showing ageist language has played a major role in workplace age-discrimination lawsuits.

As people live longer, workers well into so-called "retirement" years want a positive spin on growing older, he says, suggesting words like "golden ager" instead of "young blood" (as in, "what we need is some young blood around here.")

Driving force behind his research, he says, is his father who, at 82, still works 50 hours a week on a corporate management level. "He's a positive example of an older individual who works and provides significant value to the corporation," McCann says.

Successful aging is an important goal for most boomers.

"After all, we're all eventually going to be part of this social category," he says. "Age-related comments such as 'old woman,' 'old goat,' 'old fart' counter the effectiveness of an age-diverse workforce.

"Think twice before you use this kind of language," he cautions. "Words can be very powerful. Our future workforce is going to be more intra-generationally mixed and we need to improve our communications."

McCann would like to see the media take the lead, but that could be difficult.

In a New York Times article, Kathleen Madigan, a comic and producer for Comedy Central and a star of "History of the Joke" on the History Channel, says audiences are almost universally willing to accept jokes about age, instead of race or sex. "For one thing, it's a common trait – we're all going to get old sometime," she says.

Geezer ridicule is safe ground, it seems.

Comics have hit McCain so many times with jibes about dementia, pills, prostates and "the Wal-Mart greeter," the Republican presidential candidate has shot back: "I'm older than dirt, more scars than Frankenstein, but I learned a few things along the way."

Early 70s old? Hey, at almost-71 I'll say age may dust us a tad but we're a long way from being buried.

Now, did you hear the one about Ronald Reagan, at 69 the oldest President to take office? Debating Walter F. Mondale in 1984 in his bid for a second term, he said, "I will not make age an issue of this campaign. I am not going to exploit for political purposes my opponent's youth and inexperience."